

FOREIGN AFFAIRS PRO

Chinese diplomats pressured university over Taiwan event

Years after an official reprimand over attempted interference at NZ universities, Chinese diplomats have again tried to pressure event organisers



by **Sam Sachdeva**

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The Chinese embassy took issue with a Taiwan lecture series hosted by Victoria University of Wellington. Photo composite: Newsroom

Chinese diplomats unsuccessfully lobbied a New Zealand university over its decision to host an event partly funded by the Taiwanese government, Newsroom can reveal.

The foreign ministry has reminded embassies in the country to show respect for academic freedom and freedom of expression, having previously delivered a telling-off to Beijing over separate interventions at universities.

The latest fracas relates to the Taiwan Update, a two-day event hosted by Victoria University of Wellington this month.

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Several Taiwanese academics delivered lectures on the island's economic statecraft, energy security and political polarisation as part of the event, run by the university and the Australian National University's Taiwan Studies Program (which is financially supported by Taiwan's Ministry of Education).

Two sources told Newsroom the Chinese embassy had contacted the university to raise its objections to the event, with any recognition of Taiwan a long-held area of sensitivity for Beijing.

Shortly after taking up residence in Wellington, Chinese ambassador Wang Xiaolong [delivered a speech](#) saying "the complete reunification of the motherland" was essential for China's rejuvenation.

"If we're going to talk about red lines, as far at least as China is concerned, there is no red line redder than the Taiwan question," Wang said in 2022.

The Chinese government holds to the 'one China principle', which states that there is only one sovereign state under the name China. However, New Zealand is among a number of nations who hold to a 'one China policy', which recognises Beijing's position without accepting it as fact.

This is not the first time New Zealand universities have come under fire from Chinese diplomats.

In 2018, the University of Auckland [cancelled a planned screening](#) of a documentary on China's controversial Confucius Institutes following concerns about potential "reputational damage"; the professor hosting the event said the cancellation was a personal decision made by her, rather than ordered by the university.

The following year, Auckland University of Technology [cancelled a Tiananmen Square anniversary event](#) after Chinese government officials contacted the university asking them to call off the commemorations; the university claimed the event was cancelled due to a booking issue and not China's request.

Those incidents, and clashes over pro-Hong Kong protests at the University of Auckland, led Jacinda Ardern's Labour government to formally raise the importance of freedom of expression with Chinese officials – with China in turn claiming [its actions were "beyond reproach"](#).

A Victoria University spokesperson told Newsroom the Chinese embassy had not asked it to cancel the event. The university had “listened to and acknowledged the concerns raised” by the embassy, before passing them on to event organisers.

“At the same time, we reaffirmed the university’s commitment to academic freedom and institutional neutrality, noting that New Zealand’s legislative context differs from China’s – the event proceeded as planned.”

‘All foreign missions in New Zealand must respect New Zealand’s laws and regulations, including respect for academic freedom and freedom of expression.’

Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade

The university had a “strong and constructive relationship” with China, including research collaborations, student exchanges, and academic partnerships.

A spokesperson for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade told Newsroom that New Zealand “fully supports freedom of expression, and the role of our democratic, academic, and media institutions in upholding these core values which are enshrined in legislation”.

“New Zealand welcomes constructive relationships between resident foreign missions and our universities and other higher learning institutions.

“At the same time, all foreign missions in New Zealand must respect New Zealand’s laws and regulations, including respect for academic freedom and freedom of expression.”

Asked whether the ministry would be seeking an explanation from the embassy regarding its actions, the spokesperson said: “We are not able to comment on diplomatic engagement with the Chinese embassy.”

A spokesperson for the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office in New Zealand said it was “truly regrettable” if any external pressure had been placed on the university regarding its decision to host the event.

“We stand with the universities for upholding academic independence and freedom of discourse on any subject of interest.”

The spokesperson said the Taiwan Update initiative had been set up to improve public understanding of the economic, cultural and security issues facing Taiwan, and the New Zealand symposium had been “warmly received”.

The Chinese embassy did not respond to questions from Newsroom about why it had contacted the university to raise concerns, what those concerns were, and whether it believed its actions were appropriate.